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ABSTRACT

The contextual model argues that people in a relationship must experience a sense of loyalty, fairness, and reciprocity in order to build commitment and trust and provide ongoing mutual care. The Relational Ethics Scale (RES), which assess key relational variables, was developed for use in empirical research to test the theoretical framework of this model. In this study, the Family/RES and Friend/RES were administered to adolescents from functional and dysfunctional families to determine if contextual variables could distinguish between these two types of families, for adolescents as they have for adults in previous research. Subjects from dysfunctional families were 32 female and 18 male state-adjudicated dependent adolescents removed from their homes due to severe parental problems. Subjects from functional families were 125 female and 90 male high school students who lived with at least one parent or guardian. The findings revealed that adolescents from dysfunctional families rated their families more negatively than did adolescents from functional families. All subjects rated sibling relationships more positively than family relationships, and friendships were rated more positively than sibling relationships. The quality of the sibling relationship correlated positively with the quality of friendships. Females rated friendships more positively on loyalty issues than did males. Adolescents from functional families rated friendships higher on trust than did adolescents from dysfunctional families. All adolescents reported seeking closer relationships with their families. (NB)

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Adolescents' View of Family Functioning: A Validation of the RES *

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ABSTRACT

This study validated Hargrave's Relational Ethics Scale which measures contextual concepts. Adolescents from functional and dysfunctional families completed an expanded RES. Dysfunctional family adolescents rated their families more negatively than adolescents from functional families.

All subjects rated sibling relationships more positively than family relationships, and friendships more positively than sibling relationships. The quality of the sibling relationship correlated positively with quality of friendships. Females rated friendships more positively on loyalty issues than males. Adolescents from functional families rated friendships higher on trust issues than their counterparts.

All adolescents reported seeking closer relationships with their families.

Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner (1986) integrated aspects of several approaches to family therapy in developing the contextual model. This approach argues that people in a relationship must experience a sense of loyalty, fairness, and reciprocity in order to build commitment and trust and provide ongoing mutual care.

Increasing adoption of contextual techniques by a wide variety of clinicians mandates an evaluation of the efficacy of this treatment orientation. To date, there have been no controlled experimental investigations of the effectiveness of this form of therapy. Before such studies can be done, reliable and valid instruments to measure the basic constructs emphasized by contextualists must be developed. In addition to permitting appropriate outcome research, meaningful measures are also needed to help assess clients' relational problems and highlight areas of client functioning that are most deteriorated and in need of change.

In response to this need for empirical research to support the theoretical framework of the contextual model, Hargrave (1991) developed The Relational Ethics Scale (RES) to assess key relational variables. He focused on the major tenet of contextual therapy, which is that relational ethics dictate the quality of dyadic functioning. Relational ethics are grounded in a recognition of the need for balanced give and take in a functional relationship. Each person in a relationship is viewed as keeping an ongoing subjective ledger, which provides information about deviations from balance. Although most relationships, especially those that are generationally vertical (e.g., parent-child), are not perfectly balanced, participants strive to create balance by adjusting their behavior within the

relationship. Chronic failure of relationships to reflect balance usually is a sign of relationship dysfunction, and is associated with the participants' failure to enjoy the full mutual support the relationship could potentially provide.

The contextual model considers current relationships within the family of origin to be extremely important to optimal psychological functioning. Problems in present extra-familial relationships are understood as mirroring dysfunctional family of origin relationships. It is assumed that in order to remedy problems in the current outside relationships, one must rectify the dysfunctional family relationships. Therefore, Hargrave designed part of his scale to assess perceptions of reciprocity and trust within the family of origin. A separate subscale measures perceptions of relationship variables in a current horizontal relationship with a spouse or partner.

The RES consists of 36 self-report, Likert items, because success of a relationship is seen as depending upon an individual's subjective sense of fairness, rather than objectively measurable criteria. In an initial validation study, Hargrave administered the RES to an adult sample to determine the instrument's capacity to differentiate between adults from functional and dysfunctional family backgrounds, and to assess differential ratings of vertical and horizontal relationships and intercorrelations among items.

In the present study, the two original RES subscales (Family/RES and Friend/RES, a modification of Hargrave's spouse-subscale) were administered to adolescents from functional and dysfunctional families, to determine if contextual variables distinguish between these two types of families for adolescents as they

did for adults (Hargrave, et al, 1991). Group differences on the Friend/RES were reviewed in order to evaluate the contextual model's hypothesis that dysfunctional family of origin relationships inhibit the development and maintenance of future relationships. In addition, the adolescents completed a new RES/sibling subscale derived from Friend/RES for this investigation. Measuring the functioning of a sibling relationship provided an opportunity to determine if this horizontal relationship is a prototype for later friendships and whether the quality of the sibling relationship mediates the relationship between the quality of overall family functioning and outside friendships. It is hypothesized that a good sibling relationship may buffer the effects of a dysfunctional family, and thereby facilitate good friendships.

METHODS

Subjects:

A total of 267 subjects participated in this study including 32 females and 18 male adolescents from dysfunctional families. In addition, 125 female and 90 male adolescents from functional families completed an expanded version of Hargrave's (1991) Relational Ethics Scale (RES). All of the subjects ranged in age from thirteen to eighteen years of age with a mean of 15.40 years (sd = 1.25) for subjects from dysfunctional families and a mean of 15.83 years (sd = .84) for subjects from functional families. The ethnicity of the dysfunctional sample was 69.4% white, 26.5% black, and 4.1% Hispanic. The functional sample was 100% white.

All subjects from dysfunctional families were state adjudicated dependent adolescents who had been removed from their homes due to severe parental problems such as neglect, abuse, and addiction. At the time of the study, these adolescents had temporary residency at either the Montgomery County Youth Center or at one of two group homes operated by Helpline Center, Inc. The adolescents from functional families attended one of two local high schools and lived with at least one parent or guardian.

Instrument:

The Relational Ethics Scale (RES) used here consists of five-point Likert type self-report items measuring relationships within the family (Family/RES), the relationship with a close friend (Friend/RES) and the relationship with a sibling (Sibling/RES). Each of these subscales consists of twelve items. The Family/RES

subscale duplicates Hargrave's family subscale, except that the Family/RES statements for this study's functional sample were changed to the present tense to reflect the adolescents' current, ongoing relationships with their functional families. However, the Friend/RES and Sibling/RES subscales represent departures from Hargrave's original study. The Friend/RES subscale used in this study measures a subject's relationship with his or her "closest friend". Hargraves's corresponding subscale measures either a subject's "closest relationship excluding parents or children" for divorced or single subjects or a relationship with a spouse for married or widowed subjects. This modification was necessary in the current study due to the subjects' ages and circumstances, with none of them having been married.

The Sibling/RES subscale was developed for this investigation, in order to measure the subject's relationship with their "closest sibling". This addition was used in an effort to gain more information about horizontal relationships in which an adolescent would be closely involved. Although this is a new category, the statements for Sibling/RES (as well as for Friend/RES) are identical to those in Hargrave's Spouse/RES subscale. Along with the scale, the adolescents completed a cover sheet assessing demographic information.

RESULTS

Summary scores on the Family/RES, Sibling/RES and Friend/RES scales were obtained for each participant by adding the relevant directionally-adjusted items. High scores indicate greater levels of trust and mutuality. A two-way ANOVA was performed on each of the three summary scales, in order to examine effects of sex and family functioning.

On the Family/RES, a highly significant main effect for family function status was found ($p < .001$; $F = 47.00$). Adolescents in the dysfunctional family group scored lower ($x = 33.95$, s.d. = 9.52, $n = 42$) than those in the functional family group ($x = 44.23$, s.d. = 8.74, $n = 205$). No significant sex main effects were found.

There was a trend suggesting a sex x family function interaction ($p < .09$, $F = 2.85$). Females from dysfunctional families rated their families most negatively ($x = 32.33$, s.d. = 9.04, $n = 26$) while females from functional families rated them most positively ($x = 44.53$, s.d. = 8.74, $n = 122$).

Analysis of individual Family/RES items showed several significant main effects. Among the Family/RES items, all distinguished between the functional and dysfunctional family groups except for the item that asked if the adolescents continued to seek closer relationships with their families. For the Family/RES items, there were no significant main effects for sex, but four items showed a significant interaction effect wherein females from dysfunctional families consistently gave the most negative family ratings, while females from functional families rated relationships most positively.

On the Sibling/RES, there were no significant main nor interaction effects for

sex or family functioning. On the individual Sibling/RES items, only one significant main effect for sex was obtained. Females were more likely to agree that their siblings listened to them and valued their thoughts than males ($p < .01$, $F = 6.12$; $x = 3.80$, s.d. = 1.10, $n = 147$; $x = 3.41$, s.d. = 1.34, $n = 91$, respectively). A t-test comparison of scores for all participants on the Sibling/RES and Family/RES revealed significantly more positive evaluations of sibling relationships ($x = 47.02$, s.d. = 9.61) than family relationships, ($x = 43.01$, s.d. = 9.38) despite the fact that siblings represent a subset of family relationships ($p < .001$; $t = 5.21$; $N = 209$).

On the overall Friend/RES, a significant sex main effect was found ($p < .01$, $F = 7.60$). Females rated their friendships more positively ($x = 55.08$, s.d. = 6.47, $n = 143$) than did males ($x = 52.65$, s.d. = 6.92, $n = 94$), across the levels of family functioning. On the overall Friend/RES, adolescents from functional and dysfunctional families did not differ significantly. A t-test comparison of scores for all participants on the Friend/RES and the Family/RES, showed significantly higher scores ($p < .001$, $t = 15.12$, $N = 225$) on the measure of relationships with friends ($x = 54.19$. s.d. = 6.77) than family members ($x = 42.70$, s.d. = 9.65). Ratings of friendships were also significantly higher ($p < .001$, $t = 10.62$, $N = 210$) than those of siblings. This same pattern of significant interscale differences also held true when the dysfunctional and functional sub-samples were evaluated separately.

Individual item analyses of the Friend/RES showed several sex and family functioning main effects as well as four significant interaction effects. Females saw themselves as trying to meet their friend's emotional needs more so than males ($x = 4.61$. s.d. = 0.54, $n = 157$ versus $x = 4.17$, s.d. = 0.81, $n = 103$; $p < .001$, $F =$

27.34). Females were less likely than males to report taking advantage of their friends ($x = 1.50$, s.d. = 0.80 versus $x = 1.85$ s.d. 1.07; $p < .01$, $F = 10.02$). Females were more likely to trust their friend to look out for their best interests than males ($x = 4.39$, s.d. = 0.94 versus $x = 3.96$, s.d. = 1.20; $p < .001$, $F = 10.97$). Females were more likely than to report that their friends stand beside them than males ($x = 4.46$, s.d. = 0.82 versus $x = 4.17$, s.d. = 0.82; $p < .01$). Females were more likely to believe their friends listen to them and value their thoughts than males ($x = 4.51$, s.d. = 0.78 versus $x = 4.20$, s.d. = 0.87; $p < .01$, $F = 8.4$).

As was true of females when compared to males, adolescents from more functional families were more trusting that their friend would look out for their best interests than adolescents from dysfunctional families ($x = 4.28$, s.d. = 0.98, $n = 215$ versus $x = 3.81$, s.d. = 2.09, $n = 45$; $p < .05$, $F = 5.29$), were more likely to depict their friends as standing beside them ($x = 4.39$, s.d = 0.76, $n = 215$ versus $x = 4.16$, s.d. = 1.10, $n = 45$; $p < .06$), and were significantly less likely to report taking advantage of friends ($x = 1.58$, s.d. = 0.85, $n = 214$ versus $x = 1.95$, s.d. = 1.22, $n = 44$; $p < .01$, $F = 6.92$). In contrast to these parallels between the responses of females and subjects from more functional families, the respondents from more functional families reported expending less effort in meeting their friends' emotional needs than did those from dysfunctional families ($x = 4.39$, s.d. = 0.70, $n = 215$ versus $x = 4.64$, s.d. = 0.60, $n = 45$; $p < .05$, $F = 4.90$).

On the five Friend/RES items showing significant sex by family functioning interaction effects, in all cases the males from dysfunctional families emerged as

extreme and most different from females from dysfunctional families. This group of dysfunctional family males were most likely to report that in their friendships they retaliate when hurt, feel taken for granted, take advantage of their friend, seek their friends' opinions, and describe their friendship as one where "we give of ourselves to benefit the other," while females from dysfunctional families were least likely to report these things.

In order to evaluate the possibility that the quality of sibling relationships mediates the quality of friendships, correlations between scores on the Sibling/RES and Friend/RES were obtained for the entire sample ($r = .24$, $p < .001$ $n = 210$) and then separately for the functional and dysfunctional family subgroups. Although in all three cases the correlation was statistically significant, a stronger relationship between scale scores was found among subjects from dysfunctional families ($r = .48$, $p < .01$, $n = 23$ [the dysfunctional family subgroup had a significantly higher proportion of singletons, as might be expected]) than among those from functional families ($r = .21$, $p < .01$, $n = 187$).

DISCUSSION

As expected, adolescents from dysfunctional families evaluated their family relationships far more negatively than those from more functional families. This suggests that the Family/RES sub-scale by Hargrave successfully distinguishes between adolescents from functional and dysfunctional families, which supports the scale's validity. The only item that failed to distinguish between the groups assessed the impulse toward rejunction with family. This suggests that regardless of how functional or dysfunctional the family of origin has been in the past, adolescents are similarly motivated to seek closer relationships with their families.

There are several possible explanations for why females from dysfunctional families rated their families most negatively, while females from functional families rated their families most positively. It is possible that females are more sensitive to relationship issues and experience and report more relationship disturbances when their families do not function well, and are more likely to recognize the more positive qualities of functional families. This notion that females are socialized to value positive relationship qualities more than males, is also consistent with the finding that (independent of family functioning) females rated their friendships more positively than males. Females' greater tendency to describe their siblings as good listeners who value their thoughts, also supports the idea that females may pay greater attention to such relationship parameters. They may also invest more energy in activities designed to foster these positive relationship qualities.

The greater relationship distress voiced by females from dysfunctional families may also be attributable to differential expectations of family across the

sexes when they compare their actual relationships with their idealized images of family relationships. Females may have higher expectations of family relationships and therefore experience an exaggerated sense of disappointment in dysfunctional families. In addition, females might be more likely to be victimized and exploited (e.g., as a result of incest) within dysfunctional families, and as a consequence, experience a greater sense of betrayal, contributing to lower scores on the Family/RES.

It is possible that family dysfunction has greater short term adverse consequences for females, because of the centrality of family relationships in their lives, their sensitivity to relationship failure, and/or to greater victimization within these disturbed families. However, it is possible that females are somewhat more successful than males in compensating for this damage via corrective friendships. In this study, the males from dysfunctional families were the most likely to admit to retaliating against friends, exploiting friends, and feeling taken for granted by friends. Taken collectively, the responses of dysfunctional family males depict their relationships as intensely ambivalent. It is possible that the same socialization differences that increase females' vulnerability to detrimental forces within the family, better equip them to establish alternative positive relationships outside the family.

An alternative thesis that can account for many of the sex differences observed in this study emphasizes that females' socialization inhibits negative expressions about their close relationships. Here, the only females strongly expressing negative relationship qualities were those describing their dysfunctional

families of origin. The fact that they were rating families already publicly viewed by the courts as dysfunctional may have permitted a more candid, vertical portrayal of relational variables here.

For all subjects, there was a tendency to rate horizontal relationships (those with friends and siblings) more positively than overall family relationships. Perhaps during adolescence heightened sensitivity to issues connected with generational similarity may foster greater mutual trust and loyalty in relationships with contemporaries. The finding that friendships were rated most highly of all may be due to the fact that, unlike family relationships, these relationships are freely chosen (quite possibly in part on the basis of qualities of trust and mutuality). A central tenet of contextual theory is that impaired relationships within the family of origin often inhibit the formation of optimal extrafamilial relationships. In this study, the prediction that adolescents from dysfunctional families would have friendships characterized overall by poorer relational quality than those from functional families was not supported. Family functioning did not significantly affect overall ratings of friendships. One might speculate that the positive reports of friendships among adolescents from dysfunctional families could reflect the establishment of particularly close friendships to offset the unmet relational needs within the family. This possibility still raises questions about how adolescents from highly dysfunctional backgrounds develop the resources necessary to take the risks required to create high quality friendships. One possibility is that positive sibling relationships sometimes provide a mechanism for developing those necessary relational resources. The finding of a high degree of association between sibling

and friendship quality here supports the notion that sibling relationships often serve as prototypes for friendships. The extremely high correlation between sibling relationship and friendship quality (accounting for nearly one quarter of the variance) for the subjects from dysfunctional family backgrounds strongly suggests that a good sibling relationship may be protective in such circumstances. Having a close, trusted sibling may facilitate the establishment of good friendships for all adolescents, but may be of especially critical importance in the lives of adolescents whose families of origin function so abysmally as to require the court's removal of the children. For these children, the generalization of relational skills developed with a sibling may play a major role in determining later social success.

Future research concerning the validation of the Relational Ethics Scale should contain scales which measure sibling relationships separately from overall family relationships. One scale should measure the relationship with the subjects' parents while another focuses independently on the sibling relationships.

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